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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	EB-00
	EUR-00	UTED-00	VC-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00
	VCE-00	AC-00	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OES-00	OIC-00	OMB-00
	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	SS-00
	STR-00	TRSE-00	T-00	IIP-00	PMB-00	PRM-00	DRL-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1580
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000586

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#) [HUMANR](#)
SUBJECT: MEETING WITH ACTIVIST FATHER NGUYEN VAN LY

REF: HCMC 169

1. (SBU) Summary: In his first meeting with U.S. officials since his release from prison in February, democracy and religious freedom activist Father Nguyen Van Ly told us that he would continue to oppose Communist rule in Vietnam. Ly expressed skepticism that the GVN would faithfully implement Vietnam's new legal framework on religion and voiced criticism of his Church leadership for being too soft on the GVN. Ly was energetic and in good spirits, although he is being treated for tuberculosis. He said he was not abused in prison. End Summary

2. (SBU) On May 25 in Hue, we met with religious freedom and democracy activist Father Nguyen Van Ly at the residence of the Archbishop of Hue. This was our first visit with Ly following his amnesty and release from prison in February. (On October 19, 2001, the Thua Thien Hue Provincial People's Court sentenced Ly to two years in prison for violating the terms of his previous administrative detention and another thirteen years in prison for "damaging the Government's unity policy." The court also sentenced Ly to five years of administrative probation upon release from prison.)

3. (SBU) Ly was animated and in good spirits throughout our one-hour conversation. He said that he was not mistreated during his latest four-year interment. Immediately after his arrest in May 2001, Ly said he launched four hunger strikes over the first four months of his confinement to protest his detention. "After that the authorities did not know what to do with me, so they left me alone." Ly was held in solitary confinement in a special wing of the prison reserved for special prisoners such as dissidents and high ranking white collar criminals. He had his own 12 meter square cell with an enclosed 12 meter square yard in which he was allowed to exercise twice a day.

4. (SBU) Ly said that the five-year administrative detention order against him remains in force. At first, Hue provincial officials sought to interpret that ruling to restrict him to the single ward of the city in which the Archbishop's residence is located. However, after he threatened public protest, he was allowed to travel freely throughout the city. He is permitted to travel outside of Hue with the prior permission of local authorities. In early May, he travelled to Dong Nai province near HCMC to visit family. He said that while transiting through HCMC, he visited the wife of imprisoned Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang at their house church.

5. (SBU) Ly's health is fair. While appearing physically fit, recent x-rays of his chest revealed "spots" on both lungs. His doctor suspects tuberculosis and has started Ly on an intensive year-long regimen to combat the disease.

The Church on Ly

6. (SBU) Prior to our meeting with Ly, we also met with the Associate Bishop of Hue, Le Van Hong, Father Duong Quynh, Chancellor of the Archdiocese and Father Le Van Thang, Secretary of the Archbishop's Office to review how Vietnam's new legal framework on religion is being implemented locally (septel). During our discussion, we also touched on Father Ly. The three clearly were uncomfortable discussing Ly. They said that Ly had not yet been assigned to a parish because he remains under administrative detention. The issue remains to be worked out with provincial authorities. We asked the three Church officials whether Ly had changed as a result of his incarceration; they said that they have known and worked with Ly for many years; "he is no

different than before." When pressed for additional detail and perspective, we were told, "you will see for yourself."

Primary Focus is Political Change

17. (SBU) Ly was very thankful for continuing USG concern about his relatives. Ly said he had no interest in leaving Vietnam; his role was to stay and fight for political change and democratization. He was getting a new internet connection in his room within the month and hoped to be able to communicate directly with us and with others outside Vietnam shortly thereafter.

18. (SBU) At the start of our meeting, Ly handed us a four-point agenda, neatly written in English. With the exception of point one -- thanks to the USG for assisting his family -- Ly's focus was entirely on promoting religious freedom and ending of Communist Party rule in Vietnam. Agenda item two was Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). Ly was very familiar with the recent USG agreement with Vietnam not to impose CPC sanctions. He expressed skepticism that the GVN would follow through as pledged. While he acknowledged some progress in implementing Vietnam's new legal framework on religion in urban areas, local officials' attitudes in rural areas remain highly problematic. Religious Organizations such as the Mennonite Church, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and others also remain under intense GVN pressure. Ly singled out for criticism the statement that the Archbishop of Hue made in August 2004 on religious freedom issues in Vietnam, telling us that the statement was not tough enough. Ly said that he plans to try and visit Thich Quang Do, the General Secretary of the UBCV during a future visit to HCMC to demonstrate his solidarity with him and the UBCV.

19. (SBU) Ly then turned to focus on items three and four of his agenda: bringing political change and democracy to Vietnam. Ly said that the first objective of those who desired change was to "topple and depose" Ho Chi Minh. He anticipated that the Communist Party would be able to hang on in Vietnam for another "10 to 15 years" and asked for USG support to help identify and cultivate a new generation of democratic leaders in Vietnam. As our meeting ended, Ly pressed into our hands a 22-page, densely written, open letter that he penned in prison expressing his political and religious views. He said that he had written it in a more neutral fashion in a hope that it would pass the scrutiny of prison censors, but ultimately he was prevented from handing the document to visiting family members. (Copy of the document pouched to EAP/BCLTV.)

110. (SBU) Comment: Like Thich Quang Do, Ly is strong willed, well informed, opinionated, and energetic. He is contemptuous of the Communist Party and appears to view some of his more compromise-oriented or gradualist colleagues in the Catholic Church with open frustration. He firmly believes that Vietnam cannot have real religious freedom until there is fundamental political change. He sees himself as being tasked to help bring about that change. At least in this meeting, Ly was not interested in dialogue on issues, but was looking to us to provide a forum to the outside for his views.

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